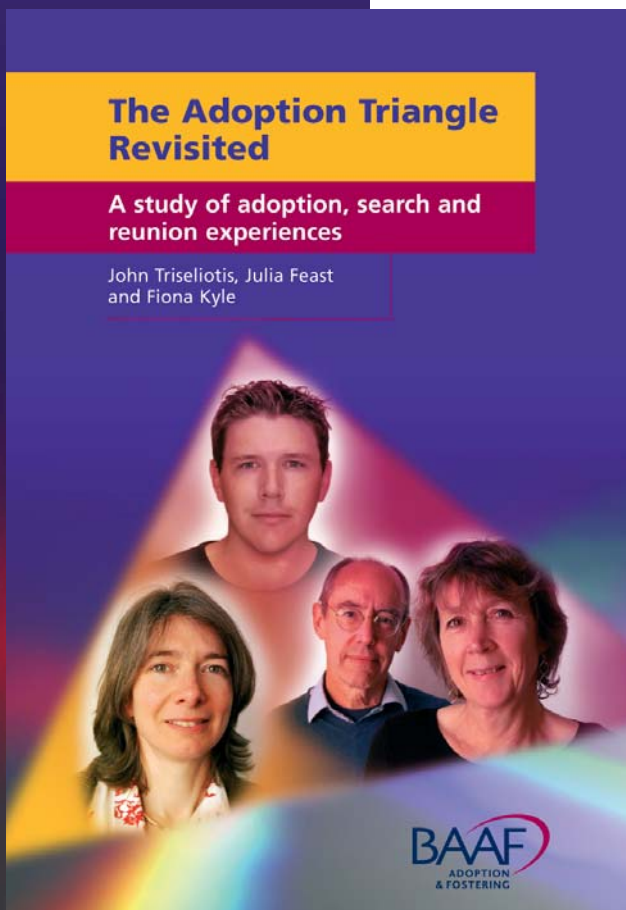


The Adoption Triangle Revisited

A study of adoption, search and reunion experiences

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The Adoption Triangle Revisited is the first British study to explore the individual experiences and perspectives of all the key players in the adoption, search and reunion process. This complex study extends and builds on the findings from the previous study, *Adoption, Search and Reunion: The long-term experience of adopted adults* (Howe and Feast, The Children's Society, 2000; republished by BAAF, 2003).

What is novel about the present study was the matching of pairs of birth mothers with their sons and daughters, and pairs of adoptive parents with their sons and daughters. Finally, triads of birth mothers, adopted people and adoptive parents were also matched. The result is a fascinating study that highlights the shared and different experiences, reactions, feelings and evaluations of all the parties.

The sample in this study mostly represents adoptions that took place before 1975, involving children mostly under the age of 18 months. Information was gathered from 93 birth mothers, 93 adoptive parents and 126 adopted people, using detailed postal questionnaires. The sample included both searching and non-searching adopted people and sought and seeker birth mothers. A small sample of birth fathers (N=15) also participated.

While this brief summary reports some of the key findings, the full and comprehensive findings can be found in *The Adoption Triangle Revisited: A study of adoption, search and reunion experiences* (Triseliotis, Feast and Kyle, BAAF, 2005).

Parting with the child for adoption

Birth mothers

Birth mothers reported that getting pregnant outside marriage resulted in them losing control of the situation and finding themselves largely powerless to determine their child's future. Except for a minority (20 per cent) who came to own the decision, the rest felt intensely pressurised by family and professionals to part with their child for adoption. From the parting to contact, intense feelings of loss, sadness and guilt dominated the lives of these birth mothers. For example, 79 per cent of all mothers reported guilt as one of a number of lasting impacts arising from the parting decision. Almost a fifth (17 per cent) gave it as the main impact. The guilt arose mainly from the belief that, irrespective of the circumstances, they had "rejected" their child.

Ever since the parting, I have lived with a feeling of loss and guilt. I have never forgiven myself, or ever will, for doing the wrong thing by having him adopted.

During the years between the adoption and renewed contact, 98 per cent reported thinking about their child and wondering whether s/he was well and had had a happy adoption. Knowing what had happened to their child might have helped to reduce the guilt arising from feeling that they had rejected their child.

Previous studies about birth mothers have found significantly higher levels of mental health problems among birth mothers when compared to the general population. However, these studies relied on mothers who took the initiative to enquire or search, or were self-selected or were recruited through the media. As this study included both seeker and sought mothers, it was possible to obtain a more balanced view of the mental health of both seeker and sought mothers. With the exception of seeker mothers, half of whom had been diagnosed between the parting and contact with poor mental health, birth mothers, on the whole and in spite of their sadness, were not found to be significantly different from the general population, before contact took place. Poor mental health was also less likely to be reported by mothers who said that adoption was their personal choice.

Many other interesting differences were found between seeker birth mothers (N=32) and sought birth mothers (N= 61). Compared to sought mothers, seeker mothers were more likely to report:

- that their parents provided little or no support during the pregnancy;
- being more anxious and worried about their child during the in-between years;
- poorer physical and mental health;
- lower self-esteem;
- that they were affected more severely by the loss of their child;
- a need to embark on a search for their son or daughter.

Almost 60 per cent of birth mothers in the study referred to their child's father as a boyfriend or in some cases a fiancé.

When birth mothers were asked whether birth relatives should have access to identifying information about their adopted son or daughter once they reached 18 years and over, their views were similar to those of birth fathers. Thirty-eight per cent were in favour, 22 per cent said 'no', and the remaining 40 per cent were unsure.

Birth fathers

The sample of birth fathers in the study was small and therefore some caution is necessary when interpreting the findings. They reported that they felt their parents had imposed the adoption decision on them and they had been powerless to prevent it. Like birth mothers, over half perceived the relationship as boyfriend–girlfriend. They also expressed similar feelings of loss and guilt about the parting and the wish to know how their child had fared after the adoption.

I had just turned 19 when Sarah was born. Sarah's adoption has been a mystery to me. I remember signing a piece of paper at the time; I am not sure what it was. But Sarah has always lived in our hearts, and often in our conversations.

Unlike birth mothers in the study, only a few of the birth fathers were aware that the law had changed in 1975 in England and Wales, giving adopted people the right to access a copy of their original birth certificate.

As with the majority of birth mothers, birth fathers said that although they would like to have contact with their son or daughter, they felt that it should be up to the adopted person to take the first step.

Adoptive parents – raising the adopted child

Almost all the adopters (94 per cent) found the experience of bringing up an adopted child to be rewarding and satisfying, and were prepared to recommend it to others. Some adopters said that, without adoption,

We would have had a childless marriage and missed all the joys, frustrations, laughter and tears of family life.

Most used superlatives to describe the pleasure that adoption had brought into their lives, believing that it was also beneficial for the child. They reported high levels of closeness and attachment between themselves and their adopted son or daughter through all stages, except for adolescence when a significant proportion of relationships became strained.

For those adoptive parents who were unable to have children of their own, the great majority reported that the adoption experience “eclipsed” any continuing feelings of disappointment surrounding their infertility. However, a significant minority (21 per cent) reported lingering feelings of regret and sadness.

Many adoptive parents said that they would have liked to have received more information about the birth family background at the time of the adoption as they felt ill-equipped to answer some of the questions their sons and daughters raised as they grew up.

Many of those who adopted transracially reported becoming aware that they could not fully understand or enter the world and experiences of their child, and therefore empathise sufficiently with their child’s pain when s/he suffered racial abuse and discrimination.

At the time of the adoption I thought love would be enough to give Angela security and the environment to blossom and grow in. I had no concept of the complexities of race and identity and how inadequate my own experience of life was to be able to help her.

Adopted people – growing up adopted

Eighty per cent of adopted people said that they felt happy about being adopted, felt loved by their parents, and had developed a sense of belonging. A broadly

similar proportion reported having developed close or very close relationships with their adoptive parents during childhood.

The closer adopted people felt to their adoptive parents, the happier they felt about being adopted, the more they felt they belonged, the higher their self-esteem and the better their emotional health.

Almost half of the adopted people had felt a sense of loss or rejection at some point in their lives as a result of being adopted. Searchers were more likely than non-searchers to report these feelings. Feelings of loss and rejection appeared to act as a strong motivating force for the search, irrespective of how they felt about the adoption. One of the main questions adopted people wanted answered was ‘why was I adopted?’.

The findings suggested that having a close relationship with, and feeling loved by, their adoptive parents helped to diminish the feelings of rejection and loss felt by adopted people. Seventy-five per cent of adopted people achieved medium to high self-esteem scores.

Thirty-one per cent of adopted people felt that birth relatives should have the right to receive identifying information once the adopted person was 18 years old or over. However, 38 per cent believed they should not and 31 per cent were unsure.

Communication and openness

Communication and openness are two of the key challenges and dilemmas for all parties in the adoption triangle. The study showed that there was a strong relationship between how close the adopted person felt towards their adoptive parents and how openly the subject of adoption was discussed. This seemed to have positive implications for an adopted person’s sense of belonging and identity, and feeling more complete as a person.

The great majority (86 per cent) of adoptive parents told their child about his or her adoptive status before they had reached the age of four, although 10–20 per cent of all adopters delayed talking about or sharing background information.

Sometimes when D was not too well he would sit on my knee for a cuddle and say tell me my story.

Ninety-seven per cent of adoptive parents reported that they felt comfortable talking about the adoption, although this did not mean that they *did* talk about it. Some did not raise the subject because their son or

daughter did not ask questions about their adoption and family background, so they did not consider that there was a need. However, some adopted people said that despite having many questions they would have liked answered, they felt uncomfortable and awkward talking to their parents. They were concerned that asking questions might upset them.

The study showed that female adopted people were more likely than their male counterparts to have different perceptions about the adoption to their adoptive parents. However, this was reversed when perceptions were matched with birth mothers when it was more likely for sons rather than daughters to disagree.

Half of the birth mothers in the study had not told their other children or husbands/partners about the adoption until shortly before, or after, contact was re-established with the adopted person. As some explained, they felt caught between the desire to have news of their child and, perhaps, to meet one day, and being apprehensive that the secret would shock and possibly alienate/threaten their relationship with their family.

Contact, reunion and the outcome

The study found that the great majority of all parties reported the experience of contact and reunion to be positive and satisfying. Adopted people, birth parents and adoptive parents were all mindful not to hurt one another and were ready to acknowledge and respect the importance of each person in the triangle. Birth parents were keen not to usurp the adoptive parents' role and place in the adopted person's life and, equally, adoptive parents felt compassion and understanding towards the birth parents. Adopted people were keen not to appear disloyal to their adoptive parents.

I have a good relationship with Jane's adoptive mother. We all get on well and I attend all the family events. The reunion has been a real blessing.

Birth father

His birth mother must have wondered all those years where he was and what he was like. I am pleased for her sake that she now knows and sees him and his family from time to time. Equally we know what she looks like.

Adoptive mother

It's been good for me and doesn't seem to have done any lasting damage to anyone else. I got a great deal of everything I was looking for and enjoy the enhancement of my life in every way.

Adopted person

Birth mothers

Nearly all the birth mothers (94 per cent) were pleased that their son or daughter had made contact with them. Ninety per cent said the contact and reunion experience had been a happy and satisfying experience.

My fears and worries were dispelled on meeting him... Meeting him has definitely helped me with all the feelings that surrounded the adoption. I now know that I made the right decision and I no longer worry about his wellbeing.

Only 8 per cent reported that their expectations of contact had not been met, mostly among seeker mothers, but none of the birth mothers said she wished that she had not met her son or daughter.

The study showed that contact and reunion stood the test of time over an average of eight years. Seventy per cent were still in face-to-face contact and 86 per cent were still in indirect contact.

Compared to those who sought, seeker mothers were more likely to lose contact at the initiative of the adopted person. Losing contact was disappointing and painful, but many of the birth mothers affected reported that they had gained a lot from the contact and had relieved much of the guilt by having had the opportunity to explain why they had made the adoption decision.

I feel that we both have answers and can accept her choice that we cease contact. I am at peace with the past.

Birth fathers

Birth fathers in the study said they were pleased to have been found by their son or daughter as it gave them the opportunity to answer many questions and to know that they were well and happy. Birth fathers said that contact had enhanced their outlook and changed them for the better. Almost half said their self-esteem had

improved and, with one exception, reported they were very glad they were sought out.

[Having contact] made me feel a better person. It has answered so many unanswered questions which have been nagging in my mind and upsetting me all my life. My mind is nearly at rest on the subject.

Like birth mothers, the great majority of the birth fathers reported that contact, and the subsequent relationships that developed with their son or daughter, helped them to cope better, come to terms with their feelings about the adoption and gain a sense of completeness.

The reunion with my daughter has given me a sense of completeness – I no longer have to worry about how she is as I now know.

Adopted people

Eighty-five per cent of adopted people reported that the contact and reunion experience was positive for them. The majority also said that the contact and reunion experience had enhanced their sense of identity, as they were able to answer questions such as: 'who am I?', 'where do I come from?', and 'why was I adopted?'

They reported many personal benefits including 'mental wellbeing', 'closeness', 'a sense of identity', and 'an endless list of positive things'.

Fifty per cent of those who had felt rejected for being placed for adoption reported that the feelings of rejection disappeared after contact; 68 per cent said the same about feelings of loss. Those who reported the disappearance or lessening of feelings of rejection and loss were also more likely to report closer relationships to their adoptive parents. Ninety-seven per cent of adopted people said that meeting their birth parents had not changed the way they felt about their adoptive parents.

I love my [adoptive] mum and dad very much. I wouldn't have become the person I am today without them. I am absolutely sure of that now that I've traced so I am grateful to them.

The closer that adopted people felt to their adoptive parents before contact the more likely they were to say that they became even closer after contact.

Adoptive parents

Sixty-eight per cent of adoptive parents in the study were aware of their son's or daughter's desire to search. However, 23 per cent were only told after the contact and reunion had occurred. The reason given for this was that the adopted person did not want to upset their parents.

In spite of their concerns that their son or daughter and themselves could get hurt in the process, the majority of adoptive parents were able to appreciate why their son or daughter wanted to search for birth family members. They reported that one of the key benefits of the search and reunion for their son or daughter was the opportunity to address identity issues.

The need to know who she was, who she looked like, where she fitted and where she belonged.

Most adopters were certain of the strength of their relationship with their son or daughter. Nevertheless, when it came to actual face-to-face meetings, some could not avoid wondering whether they might, in the end, be rejected. Most of their fears, either about themselves or of the adopted person being hurt, did not materialise.

Eighty per cent said they were pleased about their son's or daughter's search and contact. A small minority stood out from the rest by rating the contact experience as negative or being unsure about its value altogether.

A significant proportion (33 per cent) of adoptive parents referred to the new relationships forged by the adopted person and their birth parent with warmth and approval. They reported that one of the main benefits for themselves was a better understanding of their adopted son or daughter, and that, often, their own relationship was strengthened. Two-thirds of adoptive parents had direct or indirect contact with the birth family and found this satisfying.

Reported levels of closeness between them and the adopted person before and after contact and reunion with the birth family hardly changed. Ninety per cent described close or very close relationships both before and after contact.

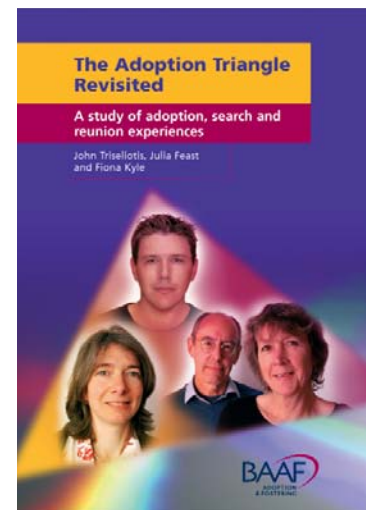
The great majority, however, were relieved that they were still viewed as “parents” by their son or daughter and that the relationships developed with a birth parent were not, on the whole, of a parental nature.

Key messages for practice and policy

- Adoption is a life-long experience and all those affected need access to counselling, advice and support services that are not time-limited.
- Publicity and information are essential for people affected by adoption so that they know how and where to access the information, advice and support they need.
- Adoptive parents need to have access to preparation, training and support to help promote communication and openness within the adoptive family environment.
- Given that most adoptive parents are understanding of their son’s or daughter’s need for background information and reunion with birth family members, adopted people should feel more confident about being open and raising the subject with them.
- Access to information can have a positive impact and help lessen living with uncertainty and the unknown for all those affected by adoption.
- Children who are placed in transracial adoptions, or who have been adopted from overseas, are likely to face additional challenges and issues relating to their sense of identity and belonging. Support services must be available to address these specific issues, and to meet the needs of the child and the family.
- While birth relatives have a legal right to ask for an intermediary service to make contact with the adopted adult, not all birth relatives will want to access intermediary services. Some birth relatives believe that it should be the adopted person who takes the first step.
- The fact that birth relatives do not initiate contact is not an indication that they would not want contact with the adopted person.
- Adoptive parents need to be confident that the relationship formed with their son or daughter in childhood is strong and enduring, and is unlikely to be threatened by contact with the birth family in adulthood. In this study, the majority of relationships were either unchanged or enhanced by the contact and reunion with the birth family.
- In the vast majority of cases, contact and reunion has a long-lasting positive impact for the adopted person, birth parents and adoptive parents.

Reference:

Howe D, and Feast J (2003) *Adoption, Search and Reunion: The long-term experience of adopted adults*, London: BAAF



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